BODY IMAGE, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY AND MENTAL HEALTH IN YOUNG ADULTS

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Body image is a combination of an individual's feelings, thoughts, and perceptions towards one's body. It is seen that with advancing time, body image dissatisfaction is also growing especially in young adults. The study hypothesized that there are likely to be significant gender differences in body image, physical activity and mental health in young adults. The participants (*n*=148 boys; *n*=152 girls) within the age range of 18 to 24 were recruited through convenient sampling method. The multidimensional body-self relations questionnaire (MBSRQ) and general health questionnaire-12 (GHQ-12) were used. Demographic sheet was used to collect their basic information. Descriptive statistics, and independent sample t-test were used to evaluate gender differences. The results showed that girls were more dissatisfied with their body image (health orientation, self-classified weight and body areas satisfaction) and are more prone towards mental health issues. These findings indicate that there is a need to step forward and help young adults in managing body image dissatisfaction and mental health problems.

Keywords: body image, physical activity level, mental health, young adults

In the contemporary world, where usage of technology is increasing day by day, people are becoming more conscious about their appearance, looks and dressing. The increasing number of beauty salons, grooming centers and fitness clubs provides evidence for this trend. With the passage of time, everyone is running in the race for wealth, beauty, fame and tries to outrun others. People are having general dissatisfaction with their lives that can be seen in every aspect of their life, including body image. Interestingly, the first person to talk about body image was a French neurologist, Bonnier, who presented the concept of body image as an important concept that needs further research (Bonnier, 1905 as cited in Toombs, 2001). Body image is determined by past events, culture, socializations, and biological factors (Cash & Smolak, 2011). The discrepancy between real body and ideal body image creates stress and dissatisfaction with one's own body (Rashid et al., 2020). The body image concerns are also increased due to media influences where thin and slim models are presented in dramas and commercials. Thin Barbie dolls are used to promote thinness as a criteria of beauty (Karli et al., 2016). On the other hand, muscular and v-shaped bodies are presented as a role model for boys through media, magazine advertisements and even through action toys (Crossley et al., 2012). Previously, body image concern was considered as an issue that is related to women only but standards set by set by our society affect boys too (Quittkat et al., 2019). Therefore, in this study, body image was explored in both girls and boys.

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Body image has been frequently found to be associated with mental health problems such as eating disorders, depression, anxiety and low self-esteem (Vannucci & Ohannessian, 2018). When researchers studied oncology patients, they concluded that their negative body image negatively influence their quality of life (Scheffers et al., 2017). Research concluded that generally negative body image was found to be highly connected with disturbed psychological adjustment (Scheffers et al., 2017). In this regard, physical activity is one of the various factors which is positively correlated with body image satisfaction (Gaddad et al., 2018). Researchers have established that positive body image is associated with increased physical activity level. Research has shown that body image can also influence the type and intensity of activity level (Kirkcaldy et al., 2002). In a study, athlete and non-athlete students were assessed on their body image satisfaction and it was clear from the results that body image satisfaction was consistently higher in those students who were participating in sports activities (Ramos et al., 2017). In this regard, the objectives of the current study were to explore the body image in young adults and how it is correlated with physical activity level and mental health as it is important to explore these variables in Pakistani culture. Moreover, the study was designed to compare boys and girls on body image, physical activity level and mental health issues.

Hypotheses

- There are likely to be significant gender differences in body image, physical activity level and mental health in young adults.

Method

Research Design

A cross-sectional research design was used to explore gender differences in body image, physical activity level and mental health in young adults.

Sample

Non-probability convenience sampling procedure was used for the selection of sample from colleges and universities. The sample was collected from six different institutions: three universities and three colleges (two girl's colleges and one boy's college). The sample of boys (n=148) and girls (n=152) within the age range of 18 to 24 years was recruited. The inclusion criterion was the age of the participants only. In every interaction, first verbal and then written consent was taken from students. To eradicate the order effects, some respondents were given MBSRQ first and some were given GHQ-12 first. Most of the students were aged 18 to 19 years and most of them belonged to joint family system. Table also showed that more than half of the participants indicated the involvement of at least one family member in exercise (57.0%).

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

Demographics	*n*	*%*
Gender		
Boys	148	49.33
Girls	152	50.66
Age		
18-19	190	63.33
20-21	86	28.67
22-24	24	8.00
Family System		
Joint	155	51.7
Nuclear	118	39.3
With father only	6	2.0
With mother only	8	2.7
Family involvement in exercise		
Yes	171	57.0
No	129	43.0
Family alertness to any sign of illness		
Yes	199	66.3
No	101	33.6

Assessment Measures

Demographic Information

Demographic information sheet included questions regarding age, family system (nuclear, joint and single parent). For the assessment of physical activity level, three items were translated and adapted from a demographic questionnaire used in a previous research by Strickland (2004). These questions were regarding number of days of physical activity in a week and minutes of physical exertion in a day.

Multidimensional Body-Self Relations Questionnaire (MBSRQ) (Cash, 2000)

It is a 69- item self-report inventory for the assessment of self-attitudinal aspects of the body image construct. Each somatic domain "appearance", "fitness" and "health/illness" reflects evaluation and cognitive behavioral orientation. The scale is divided into 7 subscales "appearance evaluation, appearance orientation, fitness evaluation, fitness orientation, health evaluation, health orientation, and illness orientation". Furthermore, the scale has three special subscales to assess overall satisfaction: overweight preoccupation, self-classified weight, and the body areas satisfaction scale. The items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "definitely disagree" to (5) "definitely agree". The reliabilities of the subscales range from .73 to .94.

General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12) (Goldberg & Williams, 1988)

To evaluate mental health of the sample, the translated version of General Health Questionnaire-12 (GHQ) (Minhas & Mubbashar, 1996) was selected as it has proven to be a useful instrument for research purposes. The original scoring of Goldberg was used where categories of "not at all" was scored as 0 and "more than usual" was scored as 3 (Minhas & Mubbashar, 1996). It is one of the most commonly used instruments to check psychological distress in a non-clinical sample.

Procedure

The research was conducted in two phases:

Phase 1: Pilot Study

In this phase, a pilot study was done and it was decided to translate the MBSRQ questionnaire in Urdu, research scales were translated and then back translated for accuracy purpose. The questionnaires were finalized and they were administered on a small sample size to evaluate any difficulty and error. To verify the difficulty in comprehension, questionnaire of MBSRQ was administered on five students of Government College University (GCU), Lahore, within the age range of 18 to 24 years. They were asked to mark the items that were difficult to understand because of the language barrier. Some items were difficult to comprehend for students so it was decided to translate the questionnaires. The questionnaire was translated in Urdu language for better comprehension and the APA translation guidelines were followed. Three bilingual experts were selected for translations (their inclusion criteria was their bilingual skills and their master's degree). These translations were then discussed with seven judges (their inclusion criteria was 16 years of education). The conceptually appropriate Urdu translation was selected and the selected version was given to three bilingual experts for back translation. The translated versions and original questionnaires were again administered on a sample of ten students of GCU, Lahore. The inclusion criterion for the sample was their age only. The students marked the items of both original and translated versions in the same way so the questionnaires were finalized.

Phase II: Main Study

In this phase, educational institutions were selected, final sample was approached and translated questionnaires were administered keeping in view ethical standards.

Ethical Considerations

- The present study was approved by the departmental committee.
- All the participants were given information related to the nature and purpose of the study.
- Participants were informed about the confidentiality of the information.
- All the participants signed the informed consent.

Results

For statistical analysis, Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used. Independent sample *t*-test was applied to evaluate differences among students on body image, physical activity level and mental health issues.

Table 3

Independent Sample t-test showing Gender Differences in Physical Activity and Mental Health

	Boys		Girls				
Variables	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t*(298)	*p*	Cohen's *d*
Physical Activity	9.67	3.99	8.06	4.15	3.42**	.001	.39
Mental Health	2.28	2.44	2.93	2.74	2.19*	.040	.19

Note. Boys (*n* = 148), Girls (*n*=152)

The table shows that there were significant gender differences in girls and boys in their physical activity level and overall mental health scores. The results showed that boys showed higher level of physical activity and low levels of psychological distress as compared to girls.

Table 4

Independent Sample t-test showing Gender Differences in Body Image

	Boys		Girls				
Variables	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*t(298)*	*p*	*Cohen's d*
Appearance Evaluation	23.93	2.59	23.38	2.83	1.76	.10	.20
Appearance Orientation	43.57	4.91	43.96	5.63	1.76	.10	.07
Fitness Evaluation	10.68	1.94	10.91	2.04	. 63	.50	.11
Fitness Orientation	43.43	5.87	42.87	5.43	1.05	.50	.09
Health Evaluation	21.04	2.90	21.89	3.68	.85	.50	.25
Health Orientation	27.97	3.32	28.99	3.93	2.21	.05	.28
Illness Orientation	16.36	3.20	15.84	3.42	2.41	.02	.15
Overweight Preoccupation	8.23	3.20	10.20	3.42	1.35	.20	.59
Self-classified Weight	5.81	1.39	5.86	1.64	5.15	.01	.45
Body Areas Satisfaction	5.61	1.29	5.28	1.54	5.10	.01	.23

Note. Boys (*n* = 148), Girls (*n*=152)

The table is showing results of independent sample *t*-test for girls and boys on subscales of body image. The results showed that there were significant gender differences in health orientation, illness orientation and self-classified weight. Results showed that girls were showing more health orientation, indicating that they were more invested in their health as compared to boys. Girls also showed higher score in self-classified weight and it showed that girls were less satisfied with their weight as compared of boys. Boys were showing more illness orientation, indicating more

alertness towards one's illness and health. Lastly, bosy were showing greater satisfaction with the body as compared to girls.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore body image, physical activity and mental health in Pakistani cultural setting. This research was designed to find out the gender differences in these three variables. The results indicated that there were significant differences in some domains of body image dissatisfaction between girls and boys. Besides these, boys were more physically active as compared to girls. Mental health issue was another variable of the study and scores revealed that girls showed more psychological distress than boys.

In the present research, it was hypothesized that there will be a difference in body image of boys and girls. It was revealed that in some domain such as appearance and fitness, boys and girls were equally conscious about their body image. It is also supported by the previous research that girls and boys are equally dissatisfied when their overall body appearances (Voges et al., 2019). Regarding the domains of body areas satisfaction, orientation and weight satisfaction, girls showed more disturbances as compared to boys. This can be supported by the previous research that girls are generally more dissatisfied as compared to boys (Quittkat et al., 2019). It was hypothesized and results supported this statement that gender difference exists between physical activity level of boys and girls. Results showed that boys were more physically active than girls. These results are persistently found in previous research data that boys are more physically active than girls (Telford et al., 2016). Another hypothesis was that there will be difference in mental health issues among girls and boys. Results showed that comparatively girls were more inclined towards mental health problems than boys. These findings are supported by previous research studies that girls were having more mental health issues as compared to boys (Van-Droogenbroeck et al., 2018). It can be concluded that youth is inspired by the global beauty trends regardless of the gender. Moreover, sedentary lifestyle which is prevailing all over the world is also seeping in Pakistani culture and settings.

Conclusions

The research showed that body image dissatisfaction is associated with low levels of physical activity level and high levels of mental health issues in young adults. Furthermore, boys showed more physical activity and girls showed more mental health related issues.

Limitations and Suggestions

There are some limitations to this study. The first was the use of convenience sampling procedure for the selection of sample that may not fully represent the general population. Another limitation was that only perception of students was assessed and their actual body mass index (BMI) was overlooked. Future studies could assess both perception and actual BMI at the same time to evaluate the level of discrepancy between

their perception and their actual weight. Furthermore, cross sectional studies could further compare the changes in body image satisfaction in different age ranges. The media influences, social pressure, and other factors responsible for decreased body satisfaction can also be explored in future research.

Implications

The study showed that there is a need to educate young adults about the transitional changes as a normal developmental process and the ideal figures that are presented in media are mostly customized through computer effects. There is also a need to encourage young adults to be physically active and for this purpose, physical activity programs can be introduced at college and university levels as a compulsory part of their education to promote physically and mentally healthy individuals.

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